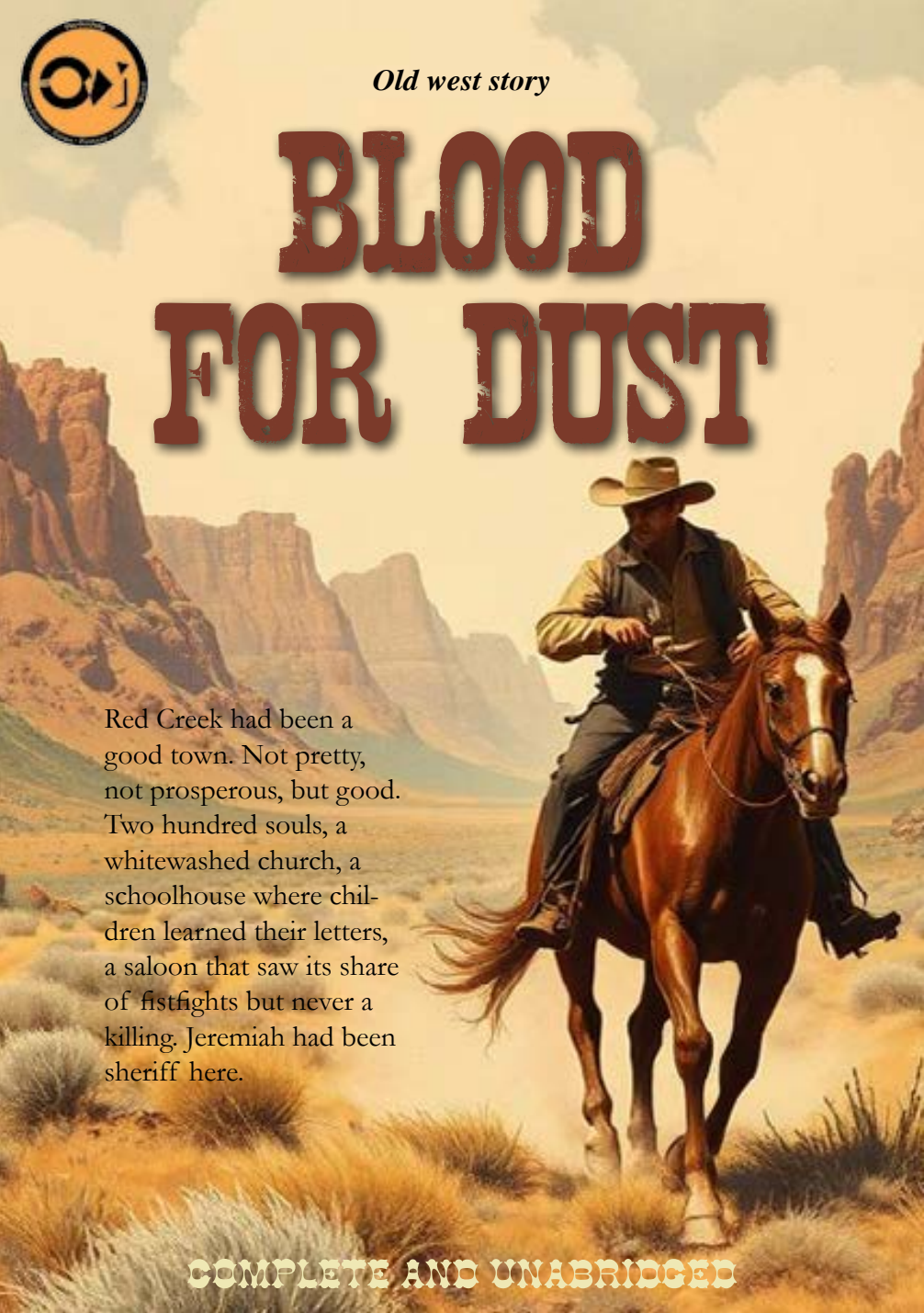
Old west story

BLOOD FOR DUST



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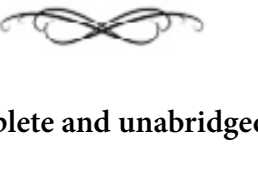
Ovi Pulp

Blood
for dust



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The wind did not howl in Red Creek anymore. It whispered.

Jeremiah Graves sat his horse, a dusty bay mustang with a scarred flank and patient eyes, on the southern ridge, looking down at what had been his home for seven years. The sun was a dull copper coin behind a veil of smoke, and the air smelled of charred pine, scorched leather, and something worse. Something that made a man's throat close up and his hand drift to the butt of his Colt.

Red Creek had been a good town. Not pretty, not prosperous, but good. Two hundred souls, a whitewashed church, a schoolhouse where children learned their letters, a saloon that saw its share of fistfights but never a killing. Jeremiah had been sheriff here. He had walked these streets every morning for seven years,

tipping his hat to the baker's wife, scuffing his boots on the boardwalk, feeling the weight of a badge over his heart like a second heartbeat.

Now the boardwalk was splinters. The church was a blackened rib cage. The schoolhouse roof had collapsed inward and the bell, the bell he himself had hung with a rope and a pulley and a prayer lay in the dirt like a broken skull.

He had been away for three days. A man had gone missing up in the canyons; a prospector named Hooper who owed the livery man twenty dollars and probably just got drunk and lost. Jeremiah had gone to find him, because that was his job, because that was the kind of sheriff he was. He found Hooper alive, cursing and thirsty, and he'd led him back to town with a fatherly lecture about cheap whiskey and loose rocks.

They crested the ridge together, Hooper on a mule, Jeremiah on Scout. And then Hooper had screamed.

The scream still echoed in Jeremiah's ears, even though Hooper had ridden away an hour ago, sobbing, headed for the next county. Jeremiah stayed. He sat his horse on the ridge, and he did not blink, because blinking felt like letting go, and letting go felt like dying.

He rode down into the ruin at a walk. The main street was a trough of ash and blackened timber. The bodies were gone, the warlord's men always took the bodies, for what purpose Jeremiah did not want to imagine. But he found other things. A child's rag doll, melted to a lump of cloth and wax. A sheriff's badge, tarnished and warped, lying in a pool of cooled glass that had once been a window. He did not pick it up.

He found the church door, the very door he and Clara had walked through on their wedding day, her hand in his, her veil catching the morning light like a promise, kicked flat and used as a ramp for a supply wagon. He found the schoolhouse blackboard, shattered, with a single word scrawled in charcoal across the largest shard, "Forgotten."

And he found Clara's locket in the mud.

He knew it was hers before he even touched it. The silver was tarnished, the chain broken, the little clasp bent. But the shape of it, the oval, the faint engraving of a rose, was burned into his memory. He had given it to her on their first anniversary, had saved for three months to buy it from a traveling jeweler. She had worn it every day since.

He knelt in the mud. His knees made a wet sound that turned his stomach. He picked up the locket, opened it with a thumbnail that trembled. The tintype inside was scorched, half the image melted into a black smear. But he could still see the outline of her face. The curve of her jaw. The smile that had made him believes for a few short years, that the world was not entirely savage.

He kissed the locket. He tucked it into the pocket over his heart. He did not weep, because weeping was a luxury he had forfeited the day he'd pinned on a badge.

The warlord called himself 'El Segador' The Reaper. Jeremiah had heard the name whispered in saloons and way stations for eighteen months, ever since the burning of the first town, a place called Adobe Wells. The Reaper moved with a private army of forty to fifty riders, men with no loyalty except to blood and gold. He wore a mask of hammered silver, a grinning skull that caught the sun like a taunt. No one knew his face. No one knew his true name.

But Jeremiah knew his voice.

He had heard it once, on a dark night in a canyon called Shadow Gorge, as the Reaper stood over a dy-

ing settler and laughed. The laugh had echoed off the canyon walls, high and cold and utterly without mercy. And Jeremiah's heart had cracked open like a dry riverbed in a flood.

Because that laugh belonged to a boy named Samuel. His younger brother. Taken by Comancheros when Samuel was twelve and Jeremiah was fourteen. Taken in the night, from the cabin they had shared in the Pecos Valley, while their mother lay dying of fever and their father was already two years in his grave. Jeremiah had tried to stop them. He had fought with a broken hoe handle, had bitten one man's ear, had screamed until his throat bled. But they had taken Samuel anyway, and Jeremiah had not seen him again.

Until the laugh.

He had tracked the Reaper across three territories, through blizzards and droughts, through towns that had been burned to the ground and towns that were still standing only because they had paid protection. He had killed nine of the Reaper's men in gunfights, had wounded a dozen more, had left a trail of blood and questions behind him. And now, sitting in the ashes of Red Creek, he knew the truth he had been running from for twenty-eight years.

'El Segador' was Samuel Graves.

His blood. His shame. His final bullet.

He unsaddled Scout in the ruins of the livery stable, fed him a handful of parched corn from his saddlebag, and sat with his back against the fallen anvil. The night came down cold and starless, and the wind whispered through the bones of the town. Jeremiah did not sleep. He cleaned his Colt, running an oiled rag through the barrel, checking the cylinder, spinning the loading gate with a click that sounded like a heartbeat. He had carried this revolver for fifteen years. It had never failed him.

In the morning, he saddled Scout, tied his bedroll behind the cantle, and filled his canteens at the ruined well. He ate a strip of jerky without tasting it. Then he mounted and turned the bay's head north, toward the rumors of a canyon called 'La Boca del Diablo' the Devil's Mouth, where the Reaper kept his stronghold.

"I'm coming, Sammy," he said to the wind. The wind did not answer. "And God help us both."

The dust of the damned

The trail north was a gauntlet of juniper and shattered rock, the sun a white-hot anvil pressing down on Jeremiah's hat. He had not spoken to another soul in four days. The silence had become a companion, familiar and unwelcome, like an old wound that ached before rain.

He rode through country that seemed forgotten by God and man. The mesas were the color of dried blood, the arroyos cracked and parched, the occasional cottonwood standing alone like a mourner at a grave. Lizards skittered across the trail. Buzzards circled in lazy spirals, patient and expectant. Jeremiah had the feeling they were following him.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, he came to Dry Fork.

It was not a town so much as a collection of bad decisions. A dozen buildings slumped along a single muddy street, their roofs sagging, their windows boarded. The saloon, the only establishment with a sign, though the sign read simply "BEER" had a hitching rail that looked like it had been repaired with fence posts and prayer. Three horses stood at the rail, their heads low, their ribs showing.

Jeremiah dismounted, tied Scout, and pushed through the saloon's batwing doors. The interior was dim and smelled of old sweat, spilled whiskey, and the particular musk of men who had given up on bathing. A bar ran along one wall, tended by a man with one eye and a tremor in his left hand. Two patrons sat at a table in the corner, playing cards with the enthusiasm of men who had forgotten how to win. A third, a fat man with a drooping mustache, slept with his head on the bar.

Jeremiah walked to the bar, set two silver dollars on the scarred wood, and said, "Whiskey. And information."

The one-eyed bartender poured a shot of amber

liquid that smelled like lamp oil. "Information costs extra," he said.

"I've got extra." Jeremiah pushed another dollar across. "I'm looking for a canyon called the Devil's Mouth."

The bartender's hand stopped trembling. He looked at Jeremiah with his one good eye, and in that eye was something that might have been pity or might have been fear. "You a lawman?"

"Was."

"Was. That's a word covers a lot of ground." The bartender wiped the bar with a rag that had once been a shirt. "The Devil's Mouth is three days north, through the badlands. You won't find it unless you know where to look. And even if you find it, you won't come back."

"That's my concern."

"You hear about the Reaper?"

"I've heard."

The bartender leaned closer. His breath smelled of sour mash and decay. "Then you know he skins travelers for sport. Hangs their hides on the canyon walls like

laundry. I seen a man once, a rider who came through here with no nose and no ears, just two bloody holes in his face. Said the Reaper cut them off one at a time, made him watch in a mirror. Said the Reaper laughed the whole time."

Jeremiah's face did not change. He had heard worse. He had seen worse. "The canyon," he said. "How do I find it?"

The bartender sighed, the sigh of a man who knew he was wasting his breath. He pulled a piece of brown paper from under the bar, sketched a rough map with a stub of pencil. "Follow the dry riverbed north until you hit the twin mesas. They look like two fists punching the sky. Go between them, then east through the box canyon. You'll come to a rise. Below it is the Devil's Mouth. And below that is hell."

Jeremiah took the map, folded it, tucked it into his shirt pocket. He drank the whiskey in one swallow; it burned like regret and turned to leave.

"Mister," the bartender said. "Turn back. I ain't saying that to be kind. I'm saying it because I don't want to bury you."

Jeremiah paused at the doors. "I got a brother to bury," he said. "One's enough."

He bought a box of .45 cartridges, a sack of beans, and a stale tortilla. Then he rode north, the twin mesas a promise on the horizon.

He made camp that night in the lee of a fallen boulder, a small fire of twisted juniper roots, a pot of beans bubbling over the coals. He ate slowly, methodically, the way a man eats when he does not know when his next meal will come. The stars came out in their thousands, cold and indifferent. Jeremiah looked up at them and thought of Clara. She had loved the stars. She had known their names, Orion, the Pleiades, the North Star that guided lost men home.

He was lost. He had been lost for twenty-eight years. But now, at last, he had a direction.

He slept in two-hour stretches, his back to the rock, his Colt in his hand. In the hour before dawn, he dreamed of Samuel. They were boys again, fishing in the Pecos River, the water cold and clear over their bare feet. Samuel laughed, that laugh, before it became a monster's and held up a trout the color of a sunset. "Look, Jerry! I caught the big one!" Jeremiah reached for the fish, but when he touched it, it turned to ash in his hands. Samuel's face began to melt, running like wax, until there was nothing left but a silver skull.

Jeremiah woke with a gasp, his hand on his Colt, his heart hammering. The fire had died to embers. The stars were fading. And somewhere to the north, a coyote howled, a lonely, mournful sound that might have been a warning or a welcome.

He kicked dirt over the embers, saddled Scout, and rode on.

The devil's mouth

The canyon was a wound in the earth.

Jeremiah saw it first from a high mesa, lying on his belly with his field glasses pressed to his eyes. The Devil's Mouth was not a single canyon but a complex of ravines and draws, converging on a central bowl perhaps two miles long and half a mile wide. The walls were the color of dried blood, layered with ancient sediment, carved by a river that had died a thousand years ago. At the far end of the bowl, a natural cave mouth yawned like a throat, the Devil's Mouth itself, from which the warlord took his name.

Jeremiah spent the entire day on that mesa, baking in the sun, counting.

He saw forty-two riders, by his best estimate. Maybe fifty. They moved through the camp with the easy confidence of men who had never been challenged. Some tended horses in a central corral. Others sat around cook fires, playing cards, cleaning weapons, laughing. A few stood sentry on the canyon rim, their silhouettes sharp against the sky. Jeremiah noted their positions, their rotations, their blind spots.

He saw the prisoners, too. A cluster of canvas tents near the cave mouth, guarded by two men with rifles. Women, mostly, from the look of them, perhaps a dozen, moving listlessly in the heat. His gut clenched. Clara had been taken, too, before they killed her. He did not know what they had done to her. He did not want to know. But he knew the Reaper's reputation.

And he saw the Reaper.

Even at this distance, the silver skull mask gleamed like a second sun. The man beneath sat on a makeshift throne at the mouth of the cave, a grotesque construction of wagon wheels, buffalo skulls, and human femurs lashed together with rawhide. He wore a duster of black leather, and at his hip hung a matched pair of engraved Colts with ivory grips. He was speaking to a lieutenant, gesturing with a gloved hand, and even from the mesa, even without hearing the words; Jere-

miah could feel the weight of him. The cruelty. The absolute certainty that he was untouchable.

Jeremiah lowered the glasses. His hands were steady. That surprised him. He had expected to shake, to tremble, to feel the old grief and rage rise up and choke him. But there was only a cold, clear calm, like the stillness before a thunderstorm.

He had a plan. It was not a good plan, it was the plan of a man with forty-two enemies and one bullet for each but it was a plan.

He waited until midnight, when the moon was a sliver of bone and the canyon floor was velvet black. He left Scout tied to a piñon with a whistle signal, two short blasts, one long, the signal for a fast escape. Then he slid down the scree slope on his heels, a shadow among shadows, his Colt in his hand.

The sentry on the eastern rim was a young man, no older than twenty, with a face that might have been handsome if not for the boredom and the bad teeth. He was smoking a cigarette, the orange glow a beacon in the dark. Jeremiah came up behind him like a ghost, clamped a hand over his mouth, and put the muzzle of his Colt against the base of his skull.

"Make a sound," Jeremiah whispered, "and your brains paint that rock."

The young man went rigid. His cigarette fell, a tiny comet extinguished before it hit the ground.

"Where's the Reaper?" Jeremiah asked.

"Cave," the young man mumbled into Jeremiah's palm. "He's always in the cave at night."

"How many men inside with him?"

"Four. Maybe five. His personal guard."

"The prisoners. How many?"

"Twelve. Thirteen. I don't keep count."

Jeremiah considered. He could kill this boy, slip into the camp, and try to reach the cave. But the odds were impossible. Even if he got past the sentries, even if he reached the cave, he would have to fight through five guards and then face Samuel and Samuel had been killing men for twenty years. Jeremiah was good with a Colt, but he was not a miracle worker.

He needed a different play.

He knocked the young man unconscious with the butt of his pistol, a sharp blow to the temple, not enough to kill, enough to keep him quiet for an hour. Then he tied him with his own belt and gagged him with his own bandana. He retreated into the dark, climbed back to Scout, and rode through the night.

The plan had changed. Now he needed dynamite. He needed rifles. And he needed help.

The preacher's cache

The abandoned mission stood fifty miles west of the Devil's Mouth, a crumbling adobe skeleton in the middle of a dust flat. It had been built by Spanish friars a hundred years ago, abandoned after an Apache uprising, and used since as a way station for outlaws, prospectors, and the occasional madman. Jeremiah had discovered it three years ago, during his first long hunt for the Reaper, and he had hidden supplies there against a day like this.

He rode into the mission courtyard at noon, his shadow a puddle of black at his horse's feet. The courtyard was empty except for a dead cottonwood and a rusted well pump. The chapel doors hung open, revealing a nave filled with drifted sand and the skeletons of roof beams. The altar, a simple stone slab, stood at the far

end, and beneath it, hidden under a floorboard, was Jeremiah's cache.

He dismounted, led Scout into the shade of the chapel, and knelt before the altar. The floorboard was exactly where he had left it, camouflaged with dust and a scatter of small stones. He pried it up with his knife, reached into the niche below, and began pulling out his treasures.

Twelve sticks of dynamite, wrapped in oilcloth. A box of blasting caps. A coil of fuse cord. A Winchester 1873 carbine, the bluing worn but the action smooth, with a full box of .44-40 cartridges. A leather pouch containing fifty double-eagle gold coins, two years of saved wages, back when he'd had wages to save. A canteen of water, still good. A tin of coffee. A spare box of .45 cartridges for his Colt.

He laid everything out on the altar; taking inventory the way a gambler counts his chips before a high-stakes game. The dynamite was his key. If he could plant charges at the base of the canyon walls, he could trigger a rockslide that would trap the Reaper's men in the bowl. But he would need to get close. He would need to be fast. And he would need someone to watch his back.

As he packed the supplies into his saddlebags, he heard a horse.

He froze. His hand went to his Colt. He stepped to the chapel door, pressed himself against the adobe wall, and peered through a crack in the doorframe.

A rider was approaching across the dust flat. A tall man on a rangy sorrel mare, leading a pack mule loaded with supplies. The man wore a black duster and a wide-brimmed hat, and tied to his saddle horn was a Bible. Across his lap rested a sawed-off shotgun, the kind that could clear a room or gut a horse.

Jeremiah watched as the man rode into the courtyard, dismounted with the ease of long practice, and looked around with the calm appraisal of someone who had seen too much to be surprised by anything. He was fiftyish, with a gray beard trimmed short and eyes the color of wet flint. A scar ran from his left ear to the corner of his mouth, a souvenir from some long-ago fight.

"I ain't looking for trouble," the man said, his voice carrying across the courtyard. "And I suspect you ain't either. But if you're heading north, we might have words."

Jeremiah stepped out of the chapel, his Colt still in his hand but pointed at the ground. "Who are you?"

The man smiled. It didn't reach his eyes. "Name's Thorne. Used to be a circuit rider. Now I just ride. I hear you're the man hunting the Reaper."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"From a one-eyed bartender in Dry Fork, and a one-eared boy named Arlo who's spreading your gospel like it's the Good Book." Thorne dismounted, kept his hands visible. "I got a score with the Reaper too. He took my congregation. Burned my church. Left me for dead with a bullet in my gut that I carried for two hundred miles."

Jeremiah studied him. The man had the look of a survivor, lean, hard, with a stillness that spoke of violence held in check. "You a preacher?"

"Was. Now I'm something else." Thorne patted the shotgun. "The Lord helps those who help themselves. I've decided to help myself to a little vengeance."

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord."

"Saith the Lord, yes. But the Lord ain't here. I am." Thorne's smile faded. "I can ride. I can shoot. And I

don't flinch. You need a second gun, Graves. Even the best man can't fight an army alone."

Jeremiah considered. He did not trust easily, trust had cost him too much. But Thorne had the look of a man who had nothing left to lose, and that was a man Jeremiah understood.

"You can ride with me," Jeremiah said. "But you follow my lead. And if you flinch when the lead starts flying, I'll leave you for the buzzards."

Thorne nodded. "Fair enough. What's the plan?"

Jeremiah looked north, toward the Devil's Mouth. "We're going to make that canyon into his grave."

The ambush at Rattlesnake Springs

They rode north for two days, keeping to the draws and arroyos, staying out of sight. Thorne proved to be a silent companion, not unfriendly, but not chatty either. He asked few questions, offered no opinions, and handled his sorrel mare with the competence of a man who had spent more years in the saddle than out of it.

On the second afternoon, they came to Rattlesnake Springs.

It was a thin ribbon of water seeping from a crack in the canyon wall, feeding a small pool of brackish green. The springs were a known watering hole on the trail to the Devil's Mouth, and Jeremiah had gambled that the Reaper's supply wagons would stop here to fill their barrels.

He was right.

They spotted the wagon from half a mile away, a heavy freight wagon pulled by four mules, canvas cover sagging over a load of crates and barrels. Two outriders flanked it, both armed with rifles, both bored. A third man drove the wagon, a whip in his hand and a bottle of mescal in his lap.

Jeremiah and Thorne lay on a rocky overlook, watching the wagon approach through a narrow defile. The defile was perfect for an ambush, steep walls, a sandy floor, no cover for a hundred yards in either direction.

"Six men," Thorne murmured, counting. "Driver, two outriders, and three more riding behind. I see rifles on all of them."

"I see them," Jeremiah said. He had already counted. "We take the outriders first. You take the left, I take the right. Then we drop the driver and the rear guard before they can dismount."

"What about the dynamite?"

"We don't use it. Too close. We need those supplies intact."

Thorne nodded. He checked his shotgun, then his revolver, a well-worn Remington with a brass frame. "You ready?"

Jeremiah drew his Colt. The walnut grip was warm in his palm. “I was born ready.”

The wagon entered the defile. The outriders rode twenty yards ahead, their rifles across their saddlebows, their heads bobbing with the rhythm of their horses. The driver was singing, a slurred, tuneless ballad about a girl in San Antone. The three rear guards trailed fifty yards behind, talking among themselves, their attention elsewhere.

Jeremiah waited until the outriders were directly below him. Then he fired.

His first shot took the left outrider through the chest. The man folded like a wet blanket and fell from his horse. Thorne’s shotgun roared an instant later, the right outrider catching a load of buckshot in the face. The driver jerked the reins, but before he could shout, Jeremiah put a bullet through his shoulder. The driver screamed, dropped the whip, and tumbled from the wagon seat.

The three rear guards reined up, reaching for their weapons. But Thorne had already shifted his aim. His second shotgun blast caught the nearest guard in the leg, spinning him off his horse. Jeremiah fired twice more, dropping the second guard with a head shot and the third with a bullet through the throat.

The whole fight lasted less than ten seconds.

Silence fell over the defile, broken only by the groan of the wounded driver and the nervous stamp of the mules. Jeremiah slid down the slope, his Colt still hot, and walked to the wagon. The driver was bleeding from the shoulder, his face gray with shock. Jeremiah knelt beside him.

"How many men in the stronghold?" he asked.

The driver spat blood. "Go to hell."

"I'll get there soon enough. Answer the question."

"Forty. Fifty. Enough to bury you."

Jeremiah stood. He looked at Thorne. "Tie him up. We'll leave him for the buzzards."

"You ain't gonna kill me?" the driver asked, a note of surprise in his pain-thickened voice.

Jeremiah looked down at him. "You're already dead," he said. "You just don't know it yet."

They stripped the wagon of its supplies: cases of ammunition, barrels of whiskey, sacks of beans and flour, and most importantly, a wooden crate marked with a red skull. Inside was a dozen more sticks of

dynamite, plus fuses and caps. The Reaper had been planning something big.

"Dos Cielos," Thorne said, reading Jeremiah's thoughts. "He's going to hit the railhead."

Jeremiah nodded. "We have to move fast. If we don't stop him here, he'll burn that town to the ground."

They took what they could carry, loaded the extra dynamite onto the spare horses they'd captured from the outriders, and rode north into the gathering dusk. Behind them, the wounded driver's cries faded into the desert silence.

The woman with the brand

They made camp that night in a box canyon, a dead end protected by high walls and a single narrow entrance. Jeremiah posted Thorne as a sentry, then sat with his back to a boulder, cleaning his Colt by the light of a small fire. The captured supplies were stacked nearby, including the dynamite, which he had wrapped in a blanket and placed well away from the flames.

He was pouring a cup of coffee when he heard the horse.

It was a single rider, coming fast from the north. Thorne raised his shotgun, but Jeremiah held up a hand. “Wait.”

The rider burst into the canyon, a woman on a lathered gray mare, her dark hair flying wild, her dress torn and stained with dust and something darker. She reined up so hard the mare nearly sat down and then she was off the horse and running toward them, her eyes wide with fear and fury.

"You're the ones," she said. Her voice was low and rough, like a man's after a night of whiskey. "You're the ones hunting the Reaper."

Jeremiah stood. "Who's asking?"

"My name is Paloma." She pulled back the collar of her dress, revealing her left shoulder. Branded into the flesh was a skull and crossbones, the same symbol the Reaper used as his banner. "I was one of his prisoners. I escaped three nights ago. I've been running ever since."

Thorne lowered his shotgun. "How did you get past the sentries?"

"There's a fissure in the canyon wall, hidden behind a curtain of cactus. It leads to a narrow passage that comes out on the eastern slope. The Reaper doesn't know about it or if he does, he doesn't guard it." Paloma's eyes met Jeremiah's. "I can show you. I can take you inside."

Jeremiah studied her. She was younger than he'd first thought, maybe twenty-five, maybe thirty. Her face was gaunt, her cheekbones sharp, her eyes ringed with exhaustion. But there was a hardness there too, the hardness of a woman who had survived things that would have broken a weaker soul.

"Why should I trust you?" he asked.

Paloma laughed, a short, bitter sound. "You shouldn't. I wouldn't trust me. But I want the Reaper dead. I want to watch the light go out of his eyes. And I want to be the one who pulls the trigger."

"You'll get your chance," Jeremiah said. "But you follow my orders. No heroics. No revenge killings until the job is done. Understood?"

Paloma nodded. "Understood."

They fed her, gave her water, let her sleep for four hours while Thorne kept watch. Jeremiah did not sleep. He sat with his back to the boulder, his Colt in his hand, and he thought about the fissure. A hidden entrance. A way into the stronghold that the Reaper didn't know about. It was the break he had been praying for.

In the morning, they rode.

The gospel of lead

The fissure was exactly where Paloma had said it would be a narrow crack in the canyon wall, hidden behind a dense thicket of cholla and prickly pear. The passage beyond was barely wide enough for a man to squeeze through, and it smelled of bat guano and ancient dust. Jeremiah went first, his Colt held before him, his shoulders scraping the rock on both sides.

The passage twisted and turned, climbing steadily, and after a hundred yards it opened into a small chamber, a natural alcove in the canyon wall, overlooking the stronghold. From this vantage, Jeremiah could see the entire bowl. The corrals, the tents, the cook fires, the cave mouth where the Reaper held court. He could also see the sentries on the rim, their backs to the alcove, their attention fixed outward.

"This is it," Paloma whispered. "This is where I watched them for three days before I made my run."

Jeremiah pulled out his field glasses and scanned the camp. The Reaper was not on his throne today. Instead, a group of prisoners, women and children, were being herded toward the cave mouth by a man with a whip. Jeremiah counted fifteen prisoners. Fifteen souls waiting to be sold or slaughtered or worse.

"We need more guns," Thorne said quietly. "Even with the dynamite, even with the fissure, we can't take fifty men with three shooters."

"We're not going to take them," Jeremiah said. "We're going to make them run."

He laid out the plan. They would plant dynamite charges at the base of the canyon walls, timed to explode at dawn. The rockslide would block both ends of the bowl, trapping the Reaper's men inside. Then they would use the fissure to descend into the camp, free the prisoners, and arm them with captured weapons. The outlaws would be caught between the rockslide and a prisoner revolt.

"It's a long shot," Thorne said.

"It's the only shot we've got," Jeremiah replied.

They spent the rest of the day preparing. Thorne cut fuse cord and crimped blasting caps. Paloma scouted the fissure passage, memorizing every twist and turn. Jeremiah cleaned his weapons for the third time, then sat in the mouth of the alcove, watching the camp below, waiting for night.

As the sun set, Thorne sat down beside him. The preacher pulled out his Bible, opened it to a random page, and began to read aloud. "'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.'"

"You believe that?" Jeremiah asked.

Thorne closed the Bible. "I believe in a lot of things I can't prove. I believe the sun will rise tomorrow. I believe a man can change. I believe mercy is stronger than vengeance." He looked at Jeremiah. "And I believe you're going to kill your brother."

Jeremiah said nothing.

"I saw your face when you talked about him," Thorne continued. "The way your voice changed. The way your hands shook. You're not hunting a warlord, Graves. You're hunting a ghost. And ghosts don't die easy."

"He's not a ghost," Jeremiah said. "He's a man. And men die."

"So do brothers," Thorne said. "But the wound doesn't."

They sat in silence as the stars came out. Below, the Reaper's camp settled into the rhythms of night, fires banked, sentries changed, laughter fading into snores. Jeremiah thought about Clara. He thought about the locket over his heart. He thought about Samuel's laugh.

Then he thought about nothing at all.

The scout

At midnight, Jeremiah went down alone.

He had argued with Thorne and Paloma about this. They wanted to come with him, to provide cover, to share the risk. But Jeremiah was adamant. He needed to see Samuel with his own eyes, to confirm that the man in the silver mask was truly his brother. He could not ask anyone else to carry that weight.

He descended through the fissure, moving slow, his boots finding holds in the rock. The passage opened onto a ledge twenty feet above the canyon floor, hidden from view by a fold in the cliff. He lay on his belly and looked down at the camp.

The Reaper's throne was empty. But the cave mouth was lit with torches, and Jeremiah could hear voices echoing from within, low, conspiratorial, punctuated by laughter. He crept along the ledge, keeping to the shadows, until he was directly above the cave entrance. Then he looked down.

And he saw Samuel without the mask.

The Reaper sat on a pile of furs inside the cave, a bottle of whiskey in his hand, his back against the cave wall. His face was a ruin. A scar ran from his hairline to his jaw, pulling the left side of his mouth into a permanent sneer. His nose had been broken and poorly reset. His ears were ragged, as if pieces had been bitten or cut away. But his eyes, his eyes were the same. Green, like Jeremiah's. Like their mother's.

Those eyes looked up.

Jeremiah flattened himself against the rock, his heart pounding. Had Samuel seen him? No. The torchlight cast deep shadows, and the ledge was high. Samuel was drunk, his gaze unfocused, his attention on the men around him.

"Three days," Samuel was saying. "Three days, and we ride on Dos Cielos. I want every horse shod, every

rifle loaded, every man sober. We burn that town to the ground, and then we own this territory. No more hiding in canyons. No more running. We build a city on the ashes."

The men around him, his lieutenants Jeremiah assumed, nodded and muttered their agreement. One of them, a snake-eyed man with a scarred lip, leaned forward. "What about the prisoners, boss? The women?"

Samuel grinned. His teeth were yellow and crooked. "Keep them. We'll need entertainment after the fight."

Jeremiah's hand tightened on his Colt. He could kill Samuel now. One shot, right between those green eyes. The lieutenants would panic, and in the chaos, he could escape back up the fissure. But the prisoners would still be trapped. The attack on Dos Cielos would still happen. And Thorne and Paloma would be left to face fifty armed men alone.

He lowered the Colt. Not yet. Not here.

He retreated back up the fissure, moving as silently as he had come. When he reached the alcove, Thorne and Paloma were waiting, their faces tight with worry.

"Well?" Thorne asked.

Jeremiah sat down heavily. His hands were shaking now. “It’s him,” he said. “It’s Samuel.”

Paloma put a hand on his shoulder. “Can you do it? When the time comes?”

Jeremiah looked at her. In her dark eyes, he saw the same question he had been asking himself for eighteen months. He did not know the answer. But he knew he had to try.

“I can do what needs to be done,” he said. “That’s all any man can promise.”

The traitor's bargain

The next morning, Jeremiah made a decision that almost cost him everything.

He left Thorne and Paloma at the alcove with instructions to plant the dynamite charges at dusk. Then he rode down into the canyon, not through the fissure, but openly, on Scout, with his hands raised and his Colt in its holster.

The sentries saw him coming from a mile away. By the time he reached the canyon floor, he was surrounded by a dozen riders, their rifles leveled at his chest. Jeremiah did not flinch. He sat easy in the saddle, his hands still raised, and said, "I want to talk to the Reaper."

The riders laughed. One of them, a big man with a bear-claw necklace, spat tobacco juice on Scout's front hooves. "The Reaper don't talk to strangers, old man. He skins 'em."

"Tell him I'm Jeremiah Graves. He'll want to see me."

Something flickered in the big man's eyes. He exchanged a glance with another rider, then jerked his head toward the cave. "Come on, then. But if you're lying, I get your boots."

They led him through the camp. Prisoners watched from behind a rope fence, women, children, a few old men. Their eyes were hollow, empty, the eyes of people who had stopped hoping. Jeremiah felt their gaze like a weight.

The cave was cool and dark, smelling of smoke, blood, and cheap perfume. Torches flickered along the walls, casting dancing shadows on the rough stone. At the far end, on his throne of bones and wagon wheels, sat the Reaper. The silver skull mask gleamed in the torchlight.

"Jeremiah Graves," the Reaper said. His voice was distorted by the mask, but Jeremiah would have known

it anywhere. "I've heard that name. You've been killing my men."

"They needed killing," Jeremiah said.

The Reaper laughed, that laugh. "Bold words for a man standing in my cave, surrounded by my men, with no weapon in his hand."

"I've got a weapon," Jeremiah said. "It's in my holster. But I didn't come here to shoot you. I came here to make a deal."

The Reaper tilted his head. The skull mask caught the light. "A deal? What kind of deal?"

"I know you're planning to hit Dos Cielos. I know you've got fifty men and enough dynamite to bring down a mountain. But you've got a problem. Your second-in-command, the one they call Cord, is planning to betray you."

It was a lie. Jeremiah had no evidence that Cord was a traitor. But he had seen the way the snake-eyed lieutenant looked at Samuel, the hunger, the calculation. It was the look of a man waiting for his moment.

The Reaper went very still. "What do you know about Cord?"

"I know he's been talking to a man named Thorne. I know he's offered to deliver you in exchange for half your gold." Jeremiah took a step forward. "I can help you stop him. I can help you clean house. But in return, you let the prisoners go. The women and children. They ride out free."

The Reaper was silent for a long moment. Then he began to laugh, not the cold, cruel laugh of before, but a genuine laugh, full of surprise and dark amusement. "You came all this way, killed my men, walked into my cave, and you want to bargain for prisoners? You're either the bravest man I've ever met or the biggest fool."

"Maybe both," Jeremiah said.

The Reaper stood. He was taller than Jeremiah remembered, broader in the shoulders, but there was a stiffness in his movements, old wounds, old pains. He walked to within arm's reach of Jeremiah and studied him through the eyeholes of the mask.

"I'll make you a counter-offer," the Reaper said. "Join me. Ride with me. You were a lawman once, but that's a poor man's game. I can make you rich. I can make you feared. I can give you a hundred men to command."

Jeremiah looked into the mask. Behind it, he knew, were his brother's green eyes. "I don't want to be feared," he said. "I want to go home."

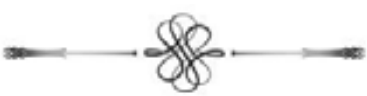
"Your home is ash."

"Then I want to build a new one."

The Reaper stepped back. "Take him to the holding pen," he said to the guards. "Let him think about my offer overnight. If he's still alive in the morning, I'll hear his answer."

The guards grabbed Jeremiah's arms. He did not resist. As they dragged him toward the prisoners' pen, he caught a glimpse of Cord, the snake-eyed lieutenant, watching from the shadows. Cord's face was unreadable, but his hand was on his gun.

Jeremiah had started something. He only hoped he could finish it.



The whipping post

The holding pen was a circle of sharpened stakes driven into the canyon floor, connected by ropes of braided rawhide. Inside, fifteen prisoners huddled against the cold, women, children, three old men. They looked at Jeremiah with dull eyes as the guards shoved him through the gap and tied his hands to a post in the center.

He stood there for an hour, his wrists raw, his shoulders burning. The sun climbed higher, and the heat became a physical weight. His tongue swelled in his mouth. His vision blurred at the edges.

Then Cord came.

The snake-eyed lieutenant walked into the pen with a bullwhip in his hand, a coil of black leather that dragged in the dust. Behind him came two guards, their faces bored. The prisoners shrank back, pressing against the stakes.

"The Reaper wants you questioned," Cord said. His voice was soft, almost gentle. "He wants to know who else is with you. How many men. Where they're hiding."

"I'm alone," Jeremiah said.

Cord smiled. "Liar."

He raised the whip.

The first stroke landed across Jeremiah's back like a line of fire. He gritted his teeth, refused to scream. The second stroke crossed the first, and the third, and the fourth. Blood soaked through his shirt, ran down his back, dripped onto the dust. He lost count after ten. He lost track of time. The world narrowed to the crack of the whip, the burn of his skin, the taste of copper in his mouth.

"Who else?" Cord asked. His voice seemed to come from very far away.

Jeremiah raised his head. His vision was red. "Your mother," he said. "She sends her regards."

Cord's face twisted. He raised the whip for another stroke...

"Enough."

The voice cut through the pain like a blade. Jeremiah looked up. The Reaper stood at the edge of the pen, the silver skull mask gleaming, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Leave him," the Reaper said. "I want to talk to him alone."

Cord lowered the whip, his expression sour. "He's lying about everything, boss. There's no traitor. He's just trying to divide us."

"Maybe," the Reaper said. "But I'll decide that. Get out."

Cord and the guards withdrew. The prisoners retreated to the far side of the pen, as far from the Reaper as they could get. The Reaper walked to Jeremiah, stood in front of him, and reached up to remove his mask.

Samuel's ruined face was even worse up close. The scar that ran from hairline to jaw had healed into a thick, white rope of tissue, pulling his mouth into a permanent grimace. His left eye drooped slightly, the lid damaged. But his right eye, the green eye, was clear and sharp and utterly cold.

"You're a fool," Samuel said. "Coming here alone. Lying about Cord. Letting yourself be caught. What were you thinking?"

Jeremiah licked his lips. They were cracked and bleeding. "I was thinking that I haven't seen my brother's face in twenty-eight years."

Samuel's expression did not change. "I don't have a brother."

"You did. Once. You had a brother who carried you on his back when you broke your leg. Who taught you to fish. Who fought off three Comancheros with a hoe handle when they tried to take you."

"And then let them take me anyway," Samuel said. His voice was flat. "You fought. You lost. And then you ran. You ran all the way to Red Creek, and you built yourself a nice little life, and you never came looking for me."

"I looked," Jeremiah said. "For twenty-eight years, I looked."

"Liar."

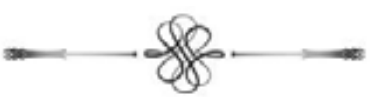
"Mama's dead, Sammy. She died three months after they took you. She asked for you on her deathbed. She said, 'Tell Samuel I love him. Tell him I'm sorry.' Those were her last words."

For the first time, something cracked in Samuel's face. A muscle jumped in his jaw. His good eye glistened.

"You should have saved me," he whispered. "You were my brother. You were supposed to protect me."

"I know," Jeremiah said. "And I've lived with that every day for twenty-eight years. Every. Single. Day."

Samuel stood there for a long moment, his ruined face working. Then he turned away, put the mask back on, and walked out of the pen without another word.



The breaking of the mask

That night, Jeremiah sat in the pen with his back against the post, his wounds throbbing, his mind racing. The prisoners had given him water and torn strips of cloth to bind his cuts. A young woman, no older than twenty, with a bruise on her cheek, had held the canteen to his lips while he drank.

"Why did he stop?" she asked. "The Reaper. Why did he stop the whipping?"

"Because he knows me," Jeremiah said. "And he's not sure what to do with that."

He did not sleep. He waited. And just before dawn, when the camp was quiet and the sentries were sleepy, Samuel came back.

He came alone, without guards, without the mask. His face was bare to the starlight, the scar a white slash in the darkness. He carried a key in his hand.

"I remember the fishing," Samuel said. His voice was soft, almost gentle. "The Pecos River. You used to bait my hook because I was afraid of the worms."

"You were six," Jeremiah said. "You got over it."

"I got over a lot of things." Samuel unlocked the gate, stepped into the pen. He knelt beside Jeremiah, looked at his brother's bloody back. "Cord shouldn't have done that. I didn't order it."

"You didn't stop it either."

Samuel was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I'm not the boy you remember."

"I know."

"I've killed men. Women. Children. I've done things that would turn your stomach."

"I know that too."

Samuel looked up at the stars. "Mama really asked for me?"

"On her deathbed. She held my hand and said your name. She was crying."

Samuel's face crumpled. For a moment, just a moment, he looked like the boy Jeremiah had lost, frightened, alone, desperate for someone to save him. Then the mask came back down, not the silver one but the mask of cruelty he had worn for so long it had become his true face.

"It doesn't matter," Samuel said. "I can't go back. I won't go back. This is who I am now."

"It doesn't have to be."

"Yes, it does." Samuel stood. He looked down at Jeremiah with those green eyes. "You came here to kill me, didn't you? That was the plan."

Jeremiah nodded. "It was."

"What changed?"

"I saw your face."

Samuel laughed, a broken, bitter sound. "And now? What now, brother?"

Jeremiah struggled to his feet. His back screamed, but he stood. He looked his brother in the eye. "Now

I give you a choice. Come with me. Surrender. Face a judge. Spend the rest of your life in a cell, but spend it alive. Or stay here, and I'll burn this canyon down around you."

Samuel stared at him. "You can't burn it down. You're one man with a bloody back."

"I'm not alone," Jeremiah said. And he whistled, two short blasts, one long.

From the fissure above, Thorne and Paloma answered with gunfire.

The escape

The dynamite charges went off at the same moment, a dozen sticks placed at the base of the canyon walls, timed to explode at dawn. The ground shook. The air filled with dust and flying rock. A thousand tons of stone slid down the cliffs, blocking the northern and southern exits of the bowl.

The Reaper's camp erupted into chaos. Men ran in every direction, some grabbing rifles, some running for the corrals, some simply screaming. The prisoners huddled together, terrified. And in the midst of it all, Thorne and Paloma descended from the fissure, guns blazing.

Thorne's shotgun roared, cutting down two guards who were trying to reach the prisoners. Paloma's rifle cracked, dropping a third. Jeremiah drew his Colt and fired, the shots coming fast and flat, each one finding its mark.

"To the corral!" Jeremiah shouted to the prisoners. "Get the horses! Ride for the fissure!"

The prisoners didn't need to be told twice. They ran, stumbling, falling, picking themselves up again. The young woman who had given him water grabbed a child's hand and led the way.

Samuel stood in the middle of the chaos, his mask gone, his face wild. He drew his matched Colts and began firing, not at Jeremiah, but at his own men. "Cord!" he screamed. "Cord, you traitor!"

Cord was running toward the cave, a saddlebag of gold over his shoulder. Samuel put a bullet through his back. Cord fell, the gold spilling across the dust. Samuel shot him again, and again, until the gun clicked empty.

"Samuel!" Jeremiah shouted. "Come on! We have to go!"

Samuel looked at him. For a moment, the madness cleared from his eyes. He saw his brother standing in the smoke and the dust, his hand outstretched. He saw the prisoners fleeing toward safety. He saw the canyon walls collapsing, trapping his empire in a tomb of rock.

"I can't," Samuel said. "This is my place. This is where I belong."

"You belong with me," Jeremiah said. "You're my brother."

Samuel shook his head. "Not anymore."

He turned and ran toward the cave. Jeremiah started after him, but Thorne grabbed his arm. "There's no time! The whole canyon is coming down!"

Another rockslide thundered from the cliffs. Boulders the size of wagons crashed into the camp, crushing tents, killing men, scattering horses. The prisoners had reached the fissure; Paloma was guiding them up, one by one.

"Go!" Jeremiah shouted to Thorne. "Get them out! I'll find Samuel!"

"You'll die!"

"Then I'll die!"

Jeremiah ran toward the cave.

The cave of bones

The cave was dark and cold, lit only by the distant glow of the burning camp behind him. Jeremiah stumbled through the entrance, his Colt held before him, his boots crunching on something that felt like bone.

He lit a match. The flame flared, revealing walls lined with skulls.

Not animal skulls. Human skulls. Dozens of them, stacked in neat rows, their empty eye sockets staring into the dark. Rib cages and femurs and vertebrae were arranged like firewood. The Reaper had decorated his lair with the remains of his victims.

Jeremiah's stomach turned. He had known his brother was a monster. But seeing it, smelling it, was something else entirely.

"Samuel!" he shouted. His voice echoed through the chamber. "Samuel, where are you?"

A laugh answered him. Not the cold laugh of the Reaper, but something wilder, more desperate. It came from deeper in the cave.

Jeremiah followed it.

The passage narrowed, then opened into a larger chamber, a natural cavern with a ceiling so high the matchlight couldn't reach it. In the center of the cavern was a pool of black water, fed by a spring that bubbled up from the rock. And standing at the edge of the pool, his back to Jeremiah, was Samuel.

"I used to come here when I was a boy," Samuel said. His voice was quiet, almost peaceful. "After the Comancheros took me. The man who bought me, he called himself El Culebra. The Snake. He brought me to this canyon. He taught me to kill. He taught me that mercy was weakness."

Jeremiah walked closer, his Colt still raised. "You didn't have to become him."

"Yes, I did." Samuel turned. His face was streaked with tears and dust. "I was twelve years old, Jerry. Twelve. I was scared and alone and no one came for

me. No one. Not you. Not Mama. Not God. So I decided that if no one would save me, I would save myself. And the only way to do that was to become the thing they were all afraid of."

"I came for you," Jeremiah said. "I never stopped looking."

"You stopped." Samuel's voice cracked. "You stopped, Jerry. You got married. You had a life. You forgot about me."

"I never forgot."

"Then why didn't you find me?" Samuel screamed. The sound echoed off the cavern walls, a howl of twenty-eight years of pain. "Why did you leave me in hell?"

Jeremiah lowered his Colt. He walked to his brother, stopped an arm's length away. "Because I was a coward," he said. "Because after a while, I was afraid of what I'd find. I was afraid you were dead. And I was afraid you were alive and you'd hate me. Both of those fears, Sammy, they were about me. Not you. I was selfish. I was weak. And I am sorry. I am so goddamn sorry."

Samuel stared at him. The tears ran down his ruined face, dripping off his chin.

"I burned your town," he whispered. "I killed your wife."

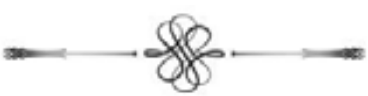
"I know."

"Do you forgive me?"

Jeremiah's heart broke. He thought of Clara. He thought of the locket over his heart. He thought of the ashes of Red Creek and the child's doll melted into a lump of cloth.

"No," he said. "I don't. But I love you anyway."

Samuel closed his eyes. His shoulders shook. And then he fell to his knees, not in surrender, but in grief.



The underground river

The rockslide had sealed the cave's entrance.

Jeremiah discovered this when he tried to lead Samuel back toward the camp. A thousand tons of stone blocked the passage, leaving only a narrow gap that no man could squeeze through. The cave had become a tomb.

"There's another way," Samuel said. His voice was hollow, emptied of its usual cruelty. "The underground river. It flows out to the eastern slope, half a mile from the canyon."

"How do you know?"

"I've explored every inch of this place. I've been here for fifteen years." Samuel turned and walked deeper into the cave. "Follow me. Stay close. The current is strong."

They walked for what felt like hours, through passages so narrow they had to turn sideways, through chambers so vast their footsteps echoed into nothing. The air grew damp and cold. The sound of rushing water grew louder.

The underground river was a black torrent, roaring through a channel worn smooth by centuries of flow. The water was ice-cold, opaque, and fast enough to sweep a man off his feet.

"We have to swim," Samuel said. "The current will carry us. Don't fight it. Just keep your head up and your mouth closed."

"You first," Jeremiah said.

Samuel looked at him. For a moment, the mask slipped again, and he was just a frightened boy. "If I drown," he said, "tell Mama I'm sorry."

"You can tell her yourself."

Samuel jumped.

He disappeared into the black water, surfaced ten feet downstream, and was swept around a bend. Jeremiah took a breath, clutched his Colt to his chest, and followed.

The cold hit him like a fist. The current grabbed him, spun him, slammed him against rocks. He lost his sense of direction, lost his breath, lost his grip on the Colt. The gun tumbled away into the dark. He kicked, fought, gasped for air. His back screamed. His lungs burned.

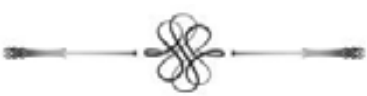
Then hands grabbed his collar and pulled.

He broke the surface, coughing, sputtering. Samuel was beside him, one arm around his chest, the other gripping a root that hung from the bank. Together, they dragged themselves onto a gravel bar.

Jeremiah lay on his back, staring up at a sliver of sky. They had made it out. The canyon was behind them. The river had carried them a mile east, to a narrow wash where the water pooled and spread.

"You saved me," Jeremiah said.

"Don't make a habit of it," Samuel replied.



Confession

They sat on the gravel bar, shivering, as the sun rose over the eastern mesas. Jeremiah's back was a agony of open wounds and river water, but he did not complain. Samuel sat with his knees drawn to his chest, his ruined face turned toward the light.

"I never got any letters," Samuel said quietly. "You said you wrote to me. I never got them."

"I left them at the mission altar," Jeremiah said. "Every year, on your birthday. I thought maybe you'd go there someday. I thought maybe you'd find them."

Samuel shook his head. “I never went back to the mission. I was too afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Afraid of hoping.” Samuel’s voice broke. “I wanted you to come for me so badly, Jerry. For years. Every night, I prayed. I’m not a praying man anymore, but back then, I prayed. And when you didn’t come, I told myself it was because you were dead. That was easier than believing you’d abandoned me.”

“I didn’t abandon you.”

“Yes, you did.” Samuel looked at him. His eyes were red, swollen, but there was no anger in them. Only a vast, bone-deep exhaustion. “You did, Jerry. You left me. And I became this, this thing because I had no one else. Because the only way to survive was to become a monster.”

Jeremiah wanted to argue. He wanted to defend himself, to explain that he had been a boy too, just fourteen, with a dying mother and no father and no one to tell him what to do. But the words stuck in his throat. Because Samuel was right.

He had left.

He had ridden away from the Pecos Valley with a grief-stricken heart and a head full of excuses. He had told himself he would come back, would search, would never rest until he found his brother. And then the years had passed. One became two. Two became ten. And somewhere along the way, he had stopped looking.

"I burned Red Creek because I knew you were there," Samuel said. His voice was barely a whisper. "I'd heard about the sheriff named Graves. I sent a man to spy on you. He brought back a description. I knew it was you. And I wanted you to suffer the way I suffered."

"Clara," Jeremiah said.

"She was in the church. I didn't know. I swear to you, I didn't know."

"But you didn't stop it."

Samuel bowed his head. "No. I didn't."

They sat in silence as the sun climbed higher. A hawk circled overhead, patient and indifferent. The river gurgled past, carrying away the dust and the blood.

"What now?" Samuel asked.

Jeremiah stood. His back screamed, but he stood. He looked down at his brother, the monster, the warlord, the boy he had failed so long ago.

"Now we ride to Dos Cielos," he said. "And you face a judge."

The mercy

They found Thorne and Paloma at the mission, along with the fifteen prisoners and a dozen horses they had captured from the Reaper's corral. The freed prisoners wept when they saw Samuel, wept with fear, with rage, with a terror so deep it had become a kind of madness. Paloma had to hold back an old woman who tried to claw Samuel's eyes out.

Thorne took Jeremiah aside. "You should have let him drown," the preacher said. "It would have been kinder."

"Maybe," Jeremiah said. "But I'm not in the kindness business."

They bound Samuel's hands and feet, threw him over a mule like a sack of grain, and rode south toward Dos Cielos. The journey took four days. Every night, Jeremiah sat watch over his brother, a rifle across his lap, his eyes never closing. Samuel did not speak. He did not eat. He simply stared at the stars with those green eyes, his face unreadable.

On the fourth day, they crested a ridge and saw Dos Cielos below them, a bustling railhead of two thousand souls, with steam engines puffing in the yard and church bells ringing the hour.

"You could let me go," Samuel said. It was the first time he had spoken in days. "Ride east with me. We could find a cabin somewhere, live out our days. You and me, like when we were boys."

Jeremiah looked at him. "You killed forty-seven people, Sammy. You can't just walk away from that."

"I can try."

"No. You can't." Jeremiah turned Scout toward the town. "This is the only mercy I can give you. A trial. A chance to speak your piece before you hang."

Samuel's face twisted. "That's not mercy. That's revenge."

"No," Jeremiah said. "Revenge would be shooting you here and leaving your body for the coyotes. This is justice. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

Jeremiah didn't answer. He rode down into Dos Cielos, his brother in chains behind him, and the future waiting like a loaded gun.

The judge's ride

The trial lasted three days.

Dos Cielos had no courthouse, so they held it in the largest saloon, the Silver Dollar, a two-story establishment with a mahogany bar and a crystal chandelier that had been shipped all the way from St. Louis. The judge was a wiry man named Ellison, a former territorial magistrate with a face like a clenched fist and a reputation for hanging first and asking questions later.

The witnesses came forward one by one. A woman who had seen the Reaper burn her husband alive. A boy who had watched his mother dragged away by the hair. A rancher whose cattle had been stolen, whose barn had been torched, whose sons had been shot down in the dust. Their testimony filled three ledgers, and at the end of each day, the crowd outside the saloon grew larger and angrier.

Samuel sat in a chair at the front of the room, his chains rattling every time he moved. He did not speak. He did not defend himself. He simply sat, his ruined face turned toward the window, watching the sun rise and fall.

On the third day, Judge Ellison called for final statements.

"Reaper," the judge said. "You have been convicted of forty-seven counts of murder, arson, kidnapping, and crimes against humanity. Do you have anything to say before I pronounce sentence?"

Samuel stood. The chains clanked. He looked around the room, at the witnesses, at the crowd, at Thorne and Paloma. And finally, at Jeremiah.

"I'm sorry," Samuel said. His voice was soft, almost inaudible. "I'm sorry for all of it. I'm sorry for the people I killed. I'm sorry for the children I orphaned. I'm sorry for the women I..." He stopped, swallowed. "I can't undo what I did. I can't bring anyone back. But I'm sorry. That's all I have."

The crowd was silent. Then someone spat. Someone shouted, "Liar!" Someone threw a bottle that shattered against the wall behind Samuel's head.

Judge Ellison banged his gavel. “Order! Order in this court!” He looked down at Samuel, and his face was sad. “Son, sorry doesn’t feed the hungry. Sorry doesn’t raise the dead. Sorry doesn’t put out the fires you set. I sentence you to hang by the neck until dead. The execution will take place tomorrow at dawn in the plaza.”

Samuel closed his eyes. He nodded once.

The guards led him away.

The long road back

That night, Jeremiah sat alone in a small room above the Silver Dollar, his back against the wall, his Colt in his lap. He had not slept in four days. His wounds were infected, he could feel the heat radiating from his back, could smell the sickly sweetness of pus. He did not care.

Thorne came to see him. The preacher sat in the room's only chair, his Bible in his hands, his face grave.

"You don't have to watch," Thorne said. "You can ride out tonight. No one would blame you."

"I would blame me," Jeremiah said.

"He's your brother."

"That's why I have to watch." Jeremiah looked at the preacher. "You ever lost someone, Thorne? Someone you loved more than your own life?"

Thorne was silent for a moment. Then he said, "My wife. Typhoid. 1868."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." Thorne stood, tucked his Bible under his arm. "I'll see you at dawn, Graves. Don't do anything foolish between now and then."

After Thorne left, Paloma came. She sat on the edge of his bed, her dark eyes searching his face.

"You're going to watch him die," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"And then what?"

Jeremiah shrugged. The motion sent a spike of pain through his back. "I don't know. Ride on, I suppose. Find another fight."

"You don't have to fight forever."

"It's all I know."

Paloma took his hand. Her fingers were calloused, warm. “Maybe it’s time you learned something new.”

She left him alone with the night. Jeremiah sat in the dark, holding his dead wife’s locket in one hand and his Colt in the other, and he tried to imagine a world where he was not hunting, not fighting, not running. He could not see it. The future was a blank wall, and beyond it, nothing.

At dawn, they led Samuel to the gallows.

Blood for dust

The gallows stood in the plaza of Dos Cielos, a raw pine scaffold that smelled of fresh-cut wood and cheap whiskey. A thousand people had gathered, ranchers, shopkeepers, saloon girls, vaqueros, even a photographer with a bulky camera on a tripod. The morning sun was the color of old gold, and the shadows were long and thin like fingers reaching for the condemned.

Jeremiah Graves sat on a bench at the front, his duster buttoned against the chill, his Colt heavy on his hip though he had no intention of using it. Beside him sat Thorne, his Bible open to the Book of Job. Paloma stood behind them, her brand covered by a shawl, her dark eyes fixed on the scaffold.

The jail wagon rattled into the plaza. Samuel Graves was led up the steps in leg irons and wrist chains.

They had cleaned him for his execution. His hair was washed, his beard trimmed, his ruined face exposed to the crowd. He wore a plain cotton shirt and denim trousers, no coat, no hat. He looked smaller than Jeremiah remembered. He looked like a boy.

The hangman was a barrel-chested man with a black hood and a noose of braided rawhide. Judge Ellison read the sentence in a flat, emotionless voice. The crowd hissed. A woman screamed, "Burn in hell!"

Samuel stood at the edge of the scaffold. He did not tremble. He looked out over the crowd with those green eyes, Jeremiah's eyes and then he looked at his brother.

"You came to watch," Samuel said. His voice was calm, almost conversational. "I figured you would."

Jeremiah stood. He walked to the foot of the scaffold, close enough to see the gray in Samuel's stubble, the yellow in his eyes. "I came to say goodbye."

"You came to feel righteous," Samuel said. "That's all this is. You couldn't save me, so you'll damn me. Makes you feel clean."

Judge Ellison raised his hand. "Last words, Reaper?"

Samuel laughed, that laugh, the one that had haunted Jeremiah's dreams. "Sure. Tell them, brother. Tell them what you did. Tell them how you rode away when I was twelve. How you left me with the Comancheros because you were scared. How you built a new life in Red Creek and never once came looking for me until I made you."

The crowd murmured. Jeremiah's jaw tightened. "I looked for you," he said quietly. "For twenty-eight years. I never stopped."

"Liar," Samuel spat. "You stopped the day you married that schoolteacher. You stopped the day she spread her legs for you. You replaced me with a wife and a dead baby and a badge."

Jeremiah flinched. The crowd gasped. Paloma put a hand on his shoulder, but he shook it off.

"You're right," Jeremiah said. The words came out like gravel. "I stopped. For ten years, I stopped. Because I was tired, Sammy. I was so goddamn tired. But that don't excuse what you became. You burned Red Creek. You killed Clara. You murdered children."

Samuel's face twisted. "Clara was an accident. She was in the church when we torched it. I didn't know..."

"You knew." Jeremiah's voice cracked. "You knew because I wrote you letters. Every year, on your birthday, I wrote you a letter and left it at the mission altar. Hoping you'd find it. Hoping you'd come home. And you burned them, didn't you? You burned my letters along with my wife."

Samuel's eyes widened. For the first time, something like shame flickered across his ruined features. "I never got no letters."

"Because you never looked." Jeremiah turned to the judge. "Do it."

Judge Ellison nodded. The hangman slipped the noose over Samuel's head, tightened it against his neck. Samuel began to shake, not from fear, but from rage.

"You think this makes you better than me?" Samuel shouted. "You think hanging your own brother makes you a hero? You're dust, Jeremiah. Just dust. And when you die, nobody will remember your name."

Jeremiah looked up at him. The sun caught the tears on his cheeks, but he did not wipe them away. "Maybe not," he said. "But Clara will. And that's enough."

Judge Ellison dropped his handkerchief. The trapdoor fell. Samuel dropped three feet and stopped with

a wet, sickening crack. His body spun slowly, once, twice, and then was still.

The crowd erupted, cheering, weeping, praying. The photographer's flash powder popped. Paloma crossed herself. Thorne closed his Bible and said, "Into thy hands, O Lord."

Jeremiah did not move. He stood at the foot of the scaffold, looking up at his brother's face, until the undertaker came with a canvas sheet. Then he walked away, through the cheering crowd, past the saloons and the brothels and the clapboard churches, to the edge of town where Scout stood tied to a hitching post.

He mounted. He rode east, toward the rising sun, toward no place in particular.

Paloma caught up to him an hour later, her mare lathered. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"Away," he said.

"Can I come?"

He looked at her, at the brand on her shoulder, the scars on her hands, the fire in her dark eyes. She was not Clara. She was not redemption. She was just another broken thing in a broken world.

"I ain't good company," he said.

"Neither am I," she replied.

They rode together into the wasteland, two shadows under a vast sky. Behind them, the dust of Dos Cielos settled over a fresh grave. Ahead, the desert stretched endless and indifferent, waiting for the next storm, the next blood, the next fool with a six-shooter and a heart full of ghosts.

Jeremiah Graves did not look back.

The End.

Blood for dust

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Old west story

BLOOD FOR DUST

Red Creek had been a good town. Not pretty, not prosperous, but good. Two hundred souls, a whitewashed church, a schoolhouse where children learned their letters, a saloon that saw its share of fistfights but never a killing. Jeremiah had been sheriff here.

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

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